

Negroes

Hampton Sketches

Johnson of Hampton

E. L. Chichester

The Institute Press
Hampton, Virginia
1912

THIS SKETCH HAS APPEARED
IN THE "UTICA PRESS," THE
"BOSTON TRANSCRIPT," THE
"YOUTH'S COMPANION," AND
THE "SOUTHERN WORKMAN."

JOHNSON OF HAMPTON

BY EDWARD L. CHICHESTER

Assistant Chaplain at Hampton Institute

IN order to give some idea of the work done at Hampton Institute, it is customary to refer to the school's record and point to the fact that 36 educational leaders (a list headed by the name of Booker T. Washington) have gone out from Hampton; that the school has sent out 2092 tradesmen and farmers; that 1618 of its girls are homekeepers, and so on, with a long list of telling figures, but to give an idea of the peculiar quality of its work is not so easy. This work is unobtrusive in the doing and its most significant results do not lend themselves readily to analysis or tabulation.

About four years ago I was going through the dairy and saw a tall, awkward looking Negro washing milk cans. I asked his name. "Johnson." I asked him where he was from, and straightening himself up, he looked at me in a bewildered way and answered, "Alabama."

"What did you do at home?"

"I worked with my father on the farm."

"Did your father own his place?"

"No, he didn't own anything, but," brightening up, "he's made the first payment on a home since I came here to school."

The boy's influence had told. Hope and ambition had come to that black laborer down at Alabama because his son had sent in a report of a new and broader outlook for his people. A year or two after this I was in the Grand Central Station in New York, and saw this same youth clutching his baggage and looking about him in a bewildered way. A man he had expected to meet, who would take him across the city, was not on hand.

"How did you happen to be in New York?" I asked.

He told me that he had been working through the summer with a dairy farmer in Connecticut, and was on his way to Hampton.

"Did you like the work?"

"Yes, and he wants me to come back next year."

Progress again. This boy was desired. Slow, unpolished, unprepossessing, if you will, but desired where he had worked. Some progress was being made

here toward the solution of the Negro problem.

Last summer I saw him again. He was on the grounds at Hampton, wearing a uniform with stripes betokening official rank. His carriage was erect and soldierly. He was still slow and deliberate in speech and movement, but his eye was clear, and he looked at you when he spoke. We shook hands cordially and I asked him what he was doing now.

"I am in charge of the dairy," he said. The superintendent was away on his vacation. "We are milking thirty cows and making certified milk"—milk that I learned later went to the sick babies at Norfolk.

"How does the inspector rate your milk?"

"We are getting ninety-six and ninety-eight per cent," he said, and seemed rather dissatisfied. "I am trying to make it one hundred, but I haven't done it yet," he added in his slow, dogged way.

He took me over the dairy. Every thing was scrupulously clean. The cattle looked fine. He knew every one, her pedigree, her peculiarities, her capacity, just what she ate, and what ration was required to produce the best results.

"Can you analyze the feed?" I asked.

"O yes."

"And the milk. Can you test it yourself?"

"Yes; that is easy," he answered.

A number of boys were at work and he directed them with a quiet word that met instant response. Here were intelligence and force—some progress since this son of a Negro laborer in Alabama had come to Hampton to get an education.

"Do you like your work?" I asked.

His eye kindled. "Yes," he said, as undemonstrative as ever.

On Sunday afternoon fifty or so of the students belonging to the Young Men's Christian Association were gathered in their meeting room. Johnson was among them. They were singing the old-time songs, "whose magic," as an eloquent writer has said, "mingles passion of tropic barbarism, rapture of saints and prophets, child-hearted gaiety, pathos of centuries of slavery and ecstasy of the hour of freedom." It is hard for the suppressed Anglo-Saxon to let himself go with the tide to this music, but he feels its tug at his heart strings, and he likes to hear it. After they had sung for a time, one and another got up and

spoke. Johnson rose slowly to his feet. Words came hard, but he succeeded in telling his fellow students, in the same slow way that he talked about his work, that his life was devoted to doing God's service in the world, that his knowledge and skill were not self-centered but devoted. Then he sat down.

You feel as if something worth while had been done here. From an ignorant Negro boy had come a man. In the reports of the school he will be listed as one more farmer, but the essence of the work accomplished here eludes all classification. It is impossible to tell what Hampton Institute and schools like it all over the country are doing for the children of the backward races, but as one meets with its slow, black Johnsons, he feels what no figures can express.

